

In Search of the Man Who May Have Created Jazz

By MICHAEL CIEPLY

NEW ORLEANS

NO one is really sure what this city's first "cornet king," Charles (Buddy) Bolden, sounded like 100 years ago, much less what made him tick. The lore says a single wax recording of Bolden's namesake ensemble was demolished with the old shed in which it was stored in the early 1960s. What is probably the most reliable rendering of his trademark tune, "Buddy Bolden's Blues," came from Jelly Roll Morton, who had heard it performed and put it on a record years after the master's death. But even the song's own lyrics warn against trusting too much. "I thought I heard Buddy Bolden say," runs the remarkably tentative opening line.

Yet this elusive character, who some aficionados say invented jazz before lapsing into ultimately fatal insanity before the age of 30, has been coming into focus in recent weeks as a troupe of seasoned filmmakers and impassioned amateurs struggle to capture Bolden and his world in not one but two, related, movies.

Eccentric in concept, ambitious in scope and not cheap — backers put the cost at more than \$10 million — the twin pictures will probably stretch the limit of what independent film can do by the time they are seen on festival or commercial screens next year.

Dan Pritzker — a billionaire's son best known as founder of and guitarist for the off-center soul-rock band Sonia Dada, and an important investor in the project as well as its director — has never made a movie. Yet that neophyte status has not kept him from attracting an impressive group of actors and behind-the-camera talent, including members of the Marsalis clan, to tell the story of a man Pritzker likens to "a shaman who flipped on the lights."

The first picture, currently titled "Bolden," is a musical biography with Anthony Mackie ("We Are Marshall") in the lead role and Wendell Pierce ("The Wire") and Jackie Earle Haley (an Oscar nominee this year for "Little Children") among the supporting cast. The second is an hourlong silent film called "The Great Observer," in which a young boy named Louis, recalling Bolden's more celebrated successor Louis Armstrong, dreams of playing the horn while becoming entangled with the denizens of New Orleans's red-light district, played by a company of ballerinas.

The films, which have no distributor yet, are meant to make their debuts in tandem. If all goes according to Mr. Pritzker's plan, the sec-

ond will play over a live performance by Wynton Marsalis, who is executive producer of the movies and has written original music that is meant to evoke the man Armstrong, Morton, Kid Ory, Sidney Bechet and other early jazzmen described as both influence and shadowy myth.

"There's a fine line between guts and stupidity," Mr. Pritzker said of his project last month. At the time, he was simmering in the spring heat with 100 mostly local players on a shoot that will end on locations and sets in Wilmington, N.C. The day's work took the group to the Carrollton cemetery in an Uptown neighborhood, where a row of small frame houses had been painted blue-gray and modestly changed to

A neophyte filmmaker with an unusual vision takes on the legend of Buddy Bolden.

stand in for the city of Bolden's late-19th-century youth.

"This is a city that lives its history but doesn't always know it," explained Mr. Mackie, 28, who grew up here before leaving to attend arts school in North Carolina and then the Juilliard School. In character as Buddy Bolden, the actor wore a heavy blue band uniform with red piping and spent much of the day sweating through a scene in which notes from his horn jump the expected musical tracks at the end of a funeral, triggering a boisterous exit parade.

In and out of the clouds, the sun has only slightly annoyed the director of photography, Vilmos Zsigmond, a film veteran ("The Black Dahlia," "The Witches of Eastwick") who suggested that weathermen should be as competent to predict cloudy and bright as cinematographers are to deal with uncertain light. As things settled on the bright side, Mr. Pritzker mulled a replay of the funeral parade on the video monitor, then set up another take, this time with Mr. Marsalis's music blaring from a loudspeaker. Arms started swinging. Handkerchiefs waved. Sun umbrellas pumped in time as locals picked up the Bolden spirit.

"If this music doesn't make you move around, something's wrong," said Mr. Pritzker, 47, speaking later over lunch in his cramped trailer. With long, dark, gray-flecked hair, he

wore jeans and green clogs and showed obvious discomfort only when the subject turned to the settling of a family dispute over the Pritzker financial empire, himself among the contentious heirs. "We're all done with that; relationships are all back together," Mr. Pritzker said of the wrangle, which had been simmering even before his father, Jay, died in 1999. Among other things, its resolution left Dan free (and with enough money) to pursue a notion that had dogged him since 1995, when a radio executive in Boulder, Colo., happened to ask if he had ever heard about Buddy Bolden and the birth of jazz.

"That he impacted my life so deeply and I didn't know who he was, that was unbelievable to me," said Mr. Pritzker, a professional musician who considers himself a connoisseur of American music.

He was to find that hard facts about Bolden are in short supply. That he was born to a working-class family in 1877 is firmly established. By the testimony of others who played with or around him, Bolden was among the first to break through accepted musical forms, pushing his group into the raucous improvisational style that would become known as jazz. In the first decade of the 20th century, he ruled the musical roost in New Orleans. By 1907, however, dementia, probably induced or assisted by alcohol, left him unable to function. That year he was committed to an insane asylum in Jackson, La., where he played his cornet only rarely with ensembles made up of patients, and where he remained until his death in 1931.

Lacking the factual base for conventional biography on the order of "Ray," about Ray Charles, or "Walk the Line," about Johnny Cash, Mr. Pritzker and his collaborators — including the writers Derrick and Steven Martini (who have written for the television series "South Beach") — have chosen to develop the myth. Their telling imagines Bolden, in the last year of his life, hearing a radio broadcast in which Armstrong, who became the public face of New Orleans jazz, paid tribute to the music's supposed birth with Bolden.

That vision, in fact, may be only slightly exaggerated. "If you look at oral histories from the musicians, they all basically talk about Bolden when they talk about where jazz came from," said Bruce Raeburn, curator of the Hogan Jazz Archive at Tulane University. According to Mr. Raeburn, those who heard Bolden agreed, first, that he was loud, and, second, that his music



Photographs by Peter Sorel, SMFSP

Mr. Mackie and Mr. Pritzker, at work on "Bolden" in New Orleans.

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